LOUIS WINNICK

Oral History: EDITED VERSION
Interview #191 by Willa Appel on June 6, 1986
Immigrated from Romania. [Parents immigrated from Russia, now part of Ukraine.]
Arrived March 14, 1922 on the S.S. *Finland* at the age of 11 months.

Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.

Your group's dramatic skit will focus on Lou Winnick's memories of living in immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn. As you read, think about how he describes immigrant life: where they lived, what they ate, what problems they faced and his own experience as a child of immigrants.

WINNICK *(left, from his Certificate of Citizenship, 1946):* My parents fled Russia, because it was undergoing some of the severe stresses of war, civil war, and pogroms [violent campaigns against Jews in czarist Russia], and there were several killings in the family. They got no farther than Bucharest [the capital of Romania], because of lack of money and lack of visa to America. They spent nearly three years in Bucharest, awaiting both to come from relatives in America. And, in March 1922, they got a visa, which allowed them to depart for America. They went by train from Bucharest to Antwerp, Belgium, and embarked on the S.S. *Finlandia*, arrived in America sometime in March 1922.

I was born in Romania so I have no experience in Russia itself, and no memory even of Romania at all, at that age. My father was born near Kiev, and my mother was born in Odessa. [**NOTE:** Both cities are in Ukraine, which at the time was part of Russia]. Odessa was the place they settled down. That's where my brother was born.

APPEL: So, when they left, they were simply fleeing, they felt they had no choice.

WINNICK: They were fleeing death, no doubt about it. I don't think there was much [thought about] the golden opportunity of America, as it was, a push from a horrible fate there. My mother's younger brother and her father, both of them were killed.

What ethnicity was Lou? Why did his family flee czarist Russia (now parts of Ukraine)?

If his parents had stayed where they lived, what does he think might have happened to them?

Then we went to Brooklyn, and here my first memories in life began. We lived in a cold water flat with an outdoor toilet. [I remember] my father taking me to the toilet on cold winter nights and being pretty unhappy about that whole experience. The Lower East Side used to be built that way, before the new tenement law came along.

APPEL: And, why did you go to Williamsburg rather than the Lower East Side?

WINNICK: It was cheaper. The training store [where father worked] was in Brooklyn itself. Transportation was always a tremendous stress to everybody. The simple act of taking the subway to go from Brooklyn to go to Manhattan was a strain. Early years of life was full of memories, being lost and wild in the Bronx trying to visit cousin [Buzzy] someplace, on Mount Pleasant Avenue, something, helplessly lost, trying to find it.

APPEL: If you wouldn't mind telling me, as you did before, informally, about what life was like for an immigrant family in Williamsburg.

WINNICK: Short, dirty, and brutish. It was poverty and anxiety; [those] are the two words that come to the mind. I mean, people just did not have money, and a penny was an important sum to a child. Uh, there's always an anxiety [that] you couldn't pay rent by the end of the week. There wouldn't be enough money to buy food. My father's salary was minuscule. And, the strange alien world we lived in with no language at all, to be confronted with a civilization which you really couldn't relate to. You fear of being starved, of being put out of your house or starving, and dealing with authorities.

And, [the family's] second move was on the same block. [It] was still a cold-water flat, but it had an indoor toilet. That was a big improvement over the outdoor toilet. And the arrangement there was three families to a floor, sharing the same toilet. And the other two families were immigrants, too. One was Russian. Ukrainian, not Jewish. And the other was an Italian family named [Piazza]. And, my mother could converse with the Ukrainians, because they both were fluent in Ukrainian. But not with the Italians; a lot of sign language went on. But there was a lot of mutual sharing, a lot of mutual babysitting. And, taking deliveries for each other, exchange of food. And my father bringing home these large quantities of fish [from his job at a fish market].

We would give Mrs. Piazza some fish for some favor she had done, and no sooner did we do that than it would come back that night, something that Mrs. Piazza had made, this tomato thing, garlic, smelled terrible—like no smell I ever had. And my mother and father both thanked her warmly for this thing, but promptly throw it in the garbage. The garbage pail was blocks away, so Mrs. Piazza would not see this. It was not kosher, and even if it were kosher, we would never eat this food.

How does Lou describe the apartments his family lived in?

How does he describe life for immigrants in his neighborhood?

What ethnic groups lived around them? Give an example of the way they did or did not get along.

One of the saviors of this anxiety-ridden culture…was this Metropolitan Life Insurance Company agent who came around and collected his twenty-five-cent and fifty-cent weekly insurance premiums, mostly for burial insurance. There was a high death rate, particularly for children, in those days. There was always a funeral a week on our block. I remember always hearses coming. Diphtheria was a very big killer, in those days. And, health authorities always coming to get you inoculated for this and that. Some—TB was then called consumption, tuberculosis was a later word. There was a very high rate of tuberculosis. Living in New York was almost a death sentence for them.

And when [the insurance agent] came Friday morning for his collection—because Friday is payday, and he came for his collection—he sat at the kitchen table and you dumped on him all the things you had during the week from authorities, you know. Letters from school, or something from the immigration service, they wanted some kind of documentation. [The agent would help people answer anything written in English.]

The recreation of everybody I knew was just to [go to] Coney Island. You got on that subway car to go to Coney Island. And you don't know what density is like until you saw Coney Island in the 1920s on a July Sunday afternoon. I mean, it was belly-to-belly and jowl-to-jowl…The first thing you notice was this huge sky. You didn't see sky in Williamsburg. The big fear for kids in Coney Island was getting lost, which happened all the time. I mean, if you ever strayed away from your family's camp more than ten feet, you never found your way back again…they had a whole pound full of lost kids…under the boardwalk, and your parents came to claim you.

It was a picnic as well as a beach, and they brought very large packages of chicken, chopped meat, and potatoes. The East European code of hygiene was not very well developed, so my parents would throw the chicken bones and paper wrappings right in the sand, not even in a basket. And enduring the hard stares and anger that some other people around us, for being dirty, you know.

APPEL: But you were aware of that as a child.

WINNICK: I was increasingly aware as I grew older. I'm sure as a child I was not aware of the anger part, the angry reaction, that must have come later on. I was increasingly embarrassed about a lot of Old World habits.

[I was] most excruciatingly embarrassed not [about] the hygiene, but English. I was the smartest kid in the class, and [getting] parts in school plays was a function of being smart, not being a good actor, so I would always get a lead role in some play. They came to see the play, and the teacher would make small talk with them. It was terrible; they couldn't understand each other. I would be very embarrassed; my toes would curl, and I'd be ashamed, I wished they wouldn't come.

Why did people buy insurance, according to Lou?

List two reasons why was Coney Island so popular.

Why did Lou feel ashamed of his parents?

APPEL: Were there other very European habits that they kept up?

WINNICK: [Settle]. [Settle] was a custom, shopping. You know, there was no supermarkets in those days, you should be shopping in little grocery stores. And you always found one grocery store, Mr. [Scarborough] I remember, and you bought everything on [settle], you use credit. And it was all ledgers, and Mr. [Scarborough] took out a white piece of paper, folded it in half, and every time you bought a can of salmon, a loaf of bread, or seedless pumpernickel, he'd mark down on the [settle, the bill]. And every Saturday—my father would be paid on Friday—and every Saturday, they would send me with the money, to settle Mr. Scarborough off for the week's bills.

Without fail, there was always a big dispute about the bill. I'd come back, I'd say, "Seven dollars and twenty-two cents for the week's groceries." She'd say, "What?! Seven dollars and twenty-two cents, impossible! It couldn't be more than four dollars. What did we buy?" We'd go back and forth, and Mr. Scarborough would pull out all of his papers [and say], "You bought this, and you bought that…" Finally, they would settle.

Other European habits—a tremendous amount of visiting around among relatives, and we never had phones…You would visit or be visited by relatives completely without notice. Sunday afternoon, sometimes six people knock on your door, and food was always the first source of hospitality. So you had to go running out to Mr. Scarborough's grocery store, buy food, and thank God you had a [settle] because you had no money. And bring back huge quantities of sour cream and eggs and cheese, and my mother would hand-make blintzes. We would do the same, visiting people in the Bronx, almost always getting lost in the process. Nobody had phones to call, to find out how to get there, so we were always asking strangers, depended on the kindness of strangers.

My father's fish business was a fish counter on Fort Hamilton Parkway and Fiftieth Street in a market…on the edge of Borough Park. To be close to work... we rented [an apartment] was on Twelfth Avenue and Thirty-Sixth Street…They cut the rent in half, if you'd haul a lot of coal and ashes. [The building was heated by a coal-burning furnace.] My mother would wash the floors. Both of them went to work in the fish store most of the day, and come home at night and do the janitorial work, or in the mornings. There was a lot of hard work in those days.

In Williamsburg, Yiddish was the language of the street, mainly. In the home, it was our mother tongue. One of the assistant principal decided that my English wasn't good enough to be enrolled in my proper class, and they told me to wait another semester. By the time I was actually enrolled in school, I was nine or ten months older than the average of my class. And English was a stress in school from day one. I was living with these mostly middle class kids who were virtually all native-born kids, in English speaking families. The school system then was heavily

dominated by the Irish. Miss Agnes Delaney was my first teacher. And she was rather sympathetic to my plight.

But English came hard, and it came swiftly but it came hard, and in school itself I made all kinds of blunders in the use of the language…[The teacher] held up a string, and I said, "Strickle," and the class laughed…I was deeply embarrassed, blushed, had my head under the table. And she was amused by my embarrassment more than by anything else. That was a nice person. And she gave me books to read. I erased the blackboards, became one of her pets. I can't tell you what tremendous authority figures teachers they were in those days. Nobody would talk back to a teacher.

What is a "settle"?

How could his family afford to live near his father's fish market?

Lou says English "came swiftly but hard." What does he mean? Give an example.

We were getting poorer, not richer, because my father's business failed rather quickly. And now I realize, in retrospect, that the Depression overtook us. He started business in '27, and by '29 it wasn't going very well, and he wasn't a very keen businessman. One of the great shames of my life was my mother asked me to borrow a dollar or two from the mothers of my friends. We always paid back, but it was a terrible thing.

APPEL: Were they eager to become American citizens?

WINNICK: Yes. Well, because all kinds of things depended upon becoming a citizen in the end. In high school, for example, I couldn't get a Regents scholarships, [because] You had to be a citizen. And you couldn't vote; it was a shame not to vote. Even getting bank loans for my father was harder because he was not a citizen.

So, we plugged away at becoming citizens. In those days, the test was heavily on the Constitution. And, so many memories of sitting around these winter nights around the kitchen table. The kitchen was the center of all life. We had no radios even. You cleared the table after dinner. Just sitting around and playing cards and storytelling at the kitchen table. And we'd take out the Constitution, and start teaching my father the Articles and the Amendments, and it was hard, it was very hard going. The Constitution.

APPEL: You did the teaching?

WINNICK: I did the teaching. I was the smart kid in the family. He got his papers in thirty-six, [but] the struggle went on for years before—so I was fifteen when he got his papers, [so] I must have started teaching him when I was eleven, twelve years old. I didn't understand parts of the Constitution myself. We came to one of the amendments [in the] Bill of Rights that there couldn't be any mandatory quartering of troops. My father said, "What does that mean?" I says, "In the old days they could force the soldiers to live in your house because they didn't have any

barracks," and he looked around and saw this little tiny apartment, and said, "Well, where would they live? What a silly idea!"

My mother became increasingly dependent on me for all kinds of things that normally a parent would do. For example, I would handle the applications for bank loans for my father, which were numerous and frequent. And frequently rejected. I was the one that always went to the gas company to complain about the bill, because the bill was always too high. And I was the one who dealt with landlords, the real estate agents, [because] I could read the contract or speak English. So I became, in a sense, sort of a junior father of the family, because of my early attainment of English.

What did Lou do to help his father become a citizen?

How did learning English change Lou's status in the family?

They became Americans, and thought of no other culture. And don't forget, they always lived in neighborhoods with people very much like themselves. In Borough Park, the half mile around us was eighty percent of the people [who were] very much like them—immigrants and new immigrants, struggling poor. While our particular block was probably eighty-five percent Jewish, one block behind us, Thirty-Seventh Street, was almost eighty-five percent Italian. Then, when we progressed a little better...we moved to Fifty-Fourth Street to a better house, but still being janitors…In a block of perhaps forty houses, six or eight were Italian. The Italians, curiously, were almost all owners of the buildings. Always had backyards, always raised tomatoes, and some grapes. And the Jews almost always nearly rented from them.

My closest friend was an Italian kid, Nick [Avina]. It was a warm interpersonal relationship one-on-one, but there was still a lot of ethnic separation. To the Jews, the Italians were, well, an inferior cast. My father would pass a church and spit, he never broke that rule. And, while [the parents accepted] my friendship with Nicky Avina, they didn't encourage [us] too much.

APPEL: Did you go to synagogue, were you trained?

WINNICK: Well, every Jewish boy went after school to prepare for Bar Mitzvah. My Bar Mitzvah gifts [included]…thirty-five dollars cash. Five-dollar bills in an envelope. My uncle Paul was at this Bar Mitzvah, and Paul saw this thirty-five dollars, and took them away from me, because we had never paid him the nine hundred dollars that we owed him for those visas that got us over to America. He was a kind man, but his wife insisted on being paid. My mother never forgave her for taking away Bar Mitzvah presents. She was furious! She wouldn't see them again for years afterwards.

APPEL: But it almost epitomizes your story of you paying for your family's passage.

WINNICK: Yeah. My father, his attempts at business all failed, not one was successful. Each time they failed, he went back to work at the fish cleanery again at somebody else's store. So we were not the great success story of the immigrants. I don't think at any time until World War Two did he ever make as much as twenty dollars a week. So we always were on the edges of

poverty and borrowing and making do…We never really overcame poverty until World War Two…but that was a very modest success.

Schooling, they didn't expect anything. [The] compulsion towards education that Jewish immigrants have was nearly always true but not universally true. I signed my own report cards all the time, and it wasn't until I got a Regents scholarship, a very prized thing to get in those days, I think there was three hundred for the whole city. I was the only one in my high school to get one. The *New York Times* published a list of all the prize-winners, in this fine print. There is Louis Winnick's name there, and the neighborhood was so proud. Wherever I went—the grocery store, the candy store, the butcher store, the shop—they all [said], "There's Louie Winnick!"

When I decided I was going to become a college enrollee, it was my decision. City College. But that was all my own decision. There's another strand [of immigrant life in New York City] which you get much more in college books—you know, kids hanging around in the street and reading great books. That was not my street, not till much later on. The library card being your passport to the world.

APPEL: But I also didn't realize how much inter-ethnic cooperation there was.

WINNICK: It was very peaceful. To this day, I repeat endlessly to everybody, the great genius of New York City is not the height of the skyscrapers and Wall Street, it's this tremendous diversity of ethnicities living in peace with each other. I mean, they may not like each other, but it's a very peaceful, cooperative thing. And most of the world is just the opposite of that. People kill each other. New York was not bad at all.

How does Lou describe the way that Jews, like his own parents, thought of the Italians? Do you think Lou felt, or feels, the same way? Why or why not?

In your opinion, who gave Lou the most support for his life choices—his family, his teachers or the community? Explain your answer.

Describe the ways that Lou felt different from his immigrant parents.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **Louis Winnick** **FROM:** _____

YEAR she came to the US: _____ **AGE** upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did his parents choose to leave home and come to America?

BECAUSE: